

# SURVIVOR: GUATEMALA, THE MAYA EMPIRE

## UNITED STATES, SEASON II

*Eighteen players, fourteen episodes, four players in the final episode, one double-elimination.*

### EPISODE ONE

Twist	Sixteen new players (pre-split into the yellow Nakúm and the teal Yaxhá) are joined by two returning players from <i>Survivor: Palau</i> . One returning player joins each tribe, so both have nine members, before they immediately compete in the first challenge.
Eleven-Mile Hike	Each tribe is presented a small pile of fruit, bags of corn, and urns of water, and must take whatever supplies they deem necessary to last them the game's duration on foot and by boat to the better of the two tribe camps, following a provided map along an eleven-mile course. The first to arrive at the better camp wins it and flint, while the losing tribe must head to a less impressive campsite. Upon arrival at their camps, both tribes receive a set of basic utensils to allow them to live as the Maya did.
Paddle Battle	Tribes must paddle out and around a buoy, collecting a hanging torch on their way back to shore. They must drag the boat to a marked area on the beach, at which point four tribe members must run up the hill and use a rope to drag the boat all the way up and across a finish line, with four other tribe members positioning logs beneath it to act like wheels in the same way the Maya built their pyramids. Finally, the ninth tribe member must light the torch from a cauldron at the bottom of the hill and carry it up to light a second cauldron at the top. The first to finish wins Immunity.

This season's opening challenge has kind of gone down in Survivor history – and indeed, reality television history – as one of the few iconic tasks casual fans actually remember, which is quite impressive considering most casual fans probably don't even remember there was a season in Guatemala. That said, in challenge design terms there's nothing too great about it. Sure, it's eleven freaking miles, but *it's also hiking*. Not only is there really no way to make it interesting to watch, but it's also impossible to tell who's winning until the two tribes come across each other.

The Immunity Challenge is designed significantly better, but still isn't perfect. I like it as a concept, and it brings the first challenge back to the traditional 'haul a heavy item around' format, but the division of work here is where it falls apart. You really don't need four people to move the logs, and the cauldron section is clearly tacked on just to give the ninth person something to do. Later in the season, it would have been a brilliant challenge, but here it's just kind of underwhelming. (And who said ancient people didn't have Google, considering it's the same method used in Egypt?)

### EPISODE TWO

Web Over Water	In this challenge adapted from <i>Survivor: Africa</i> , one tribe member at a time must run up a ramp and over a trapeze net to a 'spider web' overhead, clamber beneath under it to untie a colour-coded bag, and drop into the pool below before climbing up a ladder and returning along the trapeze net to their tribe. If a player falls without a bag, they must return to the start and switch out. The first to collect all eight bags wins fishing gear.
Dragged Through Mud	Tribes members will each be belted to an individual rope that frays from the same point on a shared rope, with the other tribe in the same position at the far end. Starting in the centre of a mud pit, they must strain against each other trying to reach three flags at their end of the pit. A stationary rope at the very end will provide extra leverage if they can reach it. The first tribe to collect all three of their flags, or the tribe with the most flags after fifteen minutes, wins Immunity. If there is a tie, a series of one-on-one matches will be held, with the goal to collect a single flag. The first to do so, or the closest after five minutes, scores a point, and the first to score three points wins Immunity.

When theming a season around a society whose inventions include rope, it's no surprise that a tug-of-war is one of the challenges. It's a little more surprising that one of the blandest challenges from *Survivor: Africa* season (itself one of the blandest seasons in terms of challenges) was revived, but still not entirely shocking given the rope connection. That said, neither of the tasks is all that interesting, and that's the real problem here. As much as I've grown to despise it when every *Survivor* challenge is an obstacle course with a puzzle at the end, the Reward Challenge probably needed a puzzle to spice it up.

It seems as though the producers realised early the tug-of-war wasn't going to work and added the option of wrestling as a way to make it less dull, but... the problem with doing that sort of thing is you have to make sure exploiting a loophole makes logical sense. Running back to stop the other team will simply put you both on their side of the central line, making it easier for them to get a little momentum and finish than it would be for you to gain momentum and cross half the field. Why would you even consider wrestling? (It's also worth noting that at least one person connected with the season has revealed since that it was even *more* of a bust than it looked in the episode, and players were actually in the mud pit for so long in various configurations that they had to pause the challenge for producers to spray more water on it.)

### EPISODE THREE

Blind Build	Each tribe must select one member as their 'caller'. The others will be blindfolded and belted together in three groups, and the caller must guide them to collect nine colour-coded pieces for a tent. Once all nine have been collected, players can remove their blindfolds and assemble the tent. The first to finish wins bedding, a tarp and rope, and a lantern with fuel.
Holding Court	In rounds, three members of each tribe must race across a raised trapeze net 'court' to collect a ball, then shoot it from tribe member to tribe member in order to throw it through one of two rings near their end of the court. Players cannot run or walk while holding the ball, but physical contact is allowed. The first tribe to throw the ball through one of their hoops scores a point. In each round, the gender-division of each team is matched but specific participants are chosen randomly. The first to score five points wins Immunity.

So, basically, this week we have a redressed 'stupid leading the blind' challenge (the eighth version in eleven seasons!) and a full-contact version of netball. Okay, then. On the one hand, both challenges have decent links to the season's theme, and are cool ideas. On the other, the first is uninspired and the second drags on too long. The latter has certainly gone down as one of the best 'beat the shit out of each other' challenges in the show's history, and in a season that has so many good ideas it holds its own quite remarkably, but really they could have just cut it down to being 'first to three wins' and it would have worked better. Sigh.

### EPISODE FOUR

Twist	Members of each tribe must vote for which of them best answers a question posed. The tribe member who receives the most votes wins a relevant prize (eg, the hungriest player wins an apple). After two players per tribe are sent away on a picnic lunch, another is chosen to have 'the most tribe pride', and everyone else is forced to switch tribes.
Rows & Throws	Tribes must paddle out to three pontoons and untie a hanging bag of 'Mayan war clubs' from each, then return to shore and empty the clubs into a basket. One tribe member at a time must then throw the clubs at three hanging tiles (at thirty, forty, and fifty feet away), trying to break them. Players can switch at will, but can only break one tile each. The first to break all three tiles wins Immunity.

As you would probably have inferred by reading my commentaries on past seasons, I'm an avowed fan of the concept of a tribe switch for the simple reason that it pretty much always stops the game from being a total anticlimax. That said, unfortunately, the actual mechanisms used to execute the shuffle often leave a lot to be desired. This is... not one of those times. It may even be the best tribe switch mechanism the show has ever employed – disguising it as a challenge, albeit a decidedly non-traditional one, is a brilliant idea I wish the show would revisit in future. On the other hand, the Immunity Challenge is kind of totally unremarkable. It's basically just a simple throwing challenge with the added complication of having to collect the weapons first. How excitement.

### EPISODE FIVE

Slave to the Grind	Tribes must race up a hill to a rope, which one tribe member must cut using a sharp stone to release two large bars. A different player must then chop a log at a second station to release two more bars, before four players fit the bars into a giant turnstile at the top of the hill and turns it to pull a cart up the hill. When it reaches the top, these six players get in and the final player must chop the anchor rope to send it down a track to the finish line. The first to finish wins a crocodile-proof swim cage, margaritas, and corn chips with assorted dips.
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What's For Launch?	In this challenge adapted from <i>Survivor: Thailand</i> , each tribe must designate one member as their launcher. They must take turns using a catapult to fire one ball at a time down a playing field to the other members of their tribe, divided into two trios with giant triangular nets. If a threesome catches a ball in their net, they score a point for their tribe. The first to score five points wins Immunity.
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If you're playing along at home, Slave to the Grind is the fourth challenge out of (by that point) eight in the season to be built around the concept of 'Mayans = Rope!'. It's also clearly the worst of the four to date, with the first phase of the challenge being subject to remarkable disparity and making the rest of the challenge a blowout. Strategic differences between chopping and sawing aside, it should be noted that the worse sawing method was that shown in the exposition clips and even when the losing player switched tactics they were nowhere near as successful chopping, which to me suggests the two rocks weren't as balanced as producers planned. To which I can only wonder why it wasn't picked up on during the trial run.

On the other hand, the Immunity Challenge is kind of brilliant. Granted it's taken from a previous season, but it was already one of the best challenges of its original season (though given which season, that's not hard), and the three-person nets add the teamwork element that was the only real flaw with the challenge the first time. Easily the best actual challenge so far this season.

## EPISODE SIX

Twist	Both tribes will attend Tribal Council to vote a member out. However, the Reward Challenge winners will compete in a second challenge for individual Immunity after the losers have returned to camp.
Boulder Smash	Two members of each tribe at a time must enter a rectangular playing field and work against the members of the opposing tribe to push a giant ball across their goal line at the end of the field. As there is only one ball, the tribes must pull against each other. The first pair to do so scores a point for their tribe. The first to score three points wins a barbecue grill, supplies for a barbecue, and the right to participate in the Immunity Challenge.
Sudden Death	Competing players must run across a clearing to a set of three hanging bags, untie and return them one at a time, then use the eleven lettered tiles inside to spell a two-word phrase. The first to correctly spell 'Ancient Ruin' wins Immunity, and the right to stay at Tribal Council for the losing tribe's questioning before transferring their Immunity to a member of the tribe.

There's something to be said for the power of visuals in challenge design, as with any other design principle. High-concept ideas are wonderful, but an idea that strays from the established theme is just as good if it is one that stands out by virtue of how it looks. The Reward Challenge in this episode is an example of such a situation – it has nothing at all to do with the 'Mayans' theme of the season, but the simple visual of people *pushing against a giant ball* is enough to make it stand out and become one of this season's better ideas. On the other hand, the Immunity Challenge (granted, one that was always intended to be quick filler) is kind of just... there, you know? As much as I hate single-challenge episodes on *Survivor*, I honestly don't think I'd have missed it if it wasn't there.

## EPISODE SEVEN

Spoolin' Around	Four players are clipped to lengths of fabric that are wound around individual poles. A fifth player must run down a field to help the first wind their fabric around themselves by moving around the pole, then unclip the fabric from the pole and lead them to the next player, where they must wind the fabric around both players, and so on. Once all four players are wrapped up together, the 'winder' can rub back to the start while the others spin the opposite way to unwrap themselves. Each time a player is freed, they can unclip and run to the finish. The first to get all five tribe members across the finish line wins a zipline tour of the rainforest canopy and a feast of chocolate.
Tomb Raider	In this challenge adapted from <i>Survivor: Africa</i> , three tribe members must work in relay to collect giant colour-coded puzzle pieces from a sandpit. Tribes' pieces are placed in the same sandpit, meaning players could accidentally reveal a piece belonging to the other tribe. Once all twelve pieces have been collected, the remaining two tribe members must assemble them on a round surface to form a replica Mayan calendar. The first to finish wins Immunity.
Twist	Immediately after voting a member out, the Immunity Challenge losers are told that the two tribes are merging, and must instead return to the winning tribe's camp. Their rewards will be moved to the new camp, and they will receive new watermelon buffs.

Spoolin' Around is just one of those completely random challenges that seems to have been set up solely for sight gags. Unlike many of them, though, it actually succeeds in being entertaining and allowing for strategy, which is nice and unexpected. Sure, 'face in the same direction when walking' doesn't seem like it'd be hard to realise, but... they *are* Survivor contestants. I like the challenge, but it doesn't need to be reused. Much like *Survivor: Africa's* Puzzle of Shields, which was also exceedingly random (and a product of not being able to have water challenges in the middle of Kenya). It's actually a very similar season to that in challenge design, with many of the same basic concepts being revisited in new ways to make them feel fresh. The real shining light of this episode is definitely the unexpected merge. Jeff Probst's closing words at Tribal Council are a waste of time so often that to have something relevant come from them is just the sort of thing the show needs – an unannounced twist that was neither tacked on to a challenge nor took the place of one. If only there were more in the show's history.

## EPISODE EIGHT

Twist	The tribe receives a treemail message telling them of an individual Immunity Idol hidden somewhere within walking distance of their camp. The note describes the idol and states it is neither buried nor impossible to reach, before explaining it can be played before the vote at any Tribal Council until the 'final four' to save its user.
Pot Head	Prior to the challenge being explained, players are given the option to compete or instead eat a feast. Those who choose to compete must stand on a small cube and balance a clay pot on their head for as long as they can without touching it, using a small sandbag for assistance. If a player steps off their cube, or touches or drops their pot, they are out of the challenge. The last player left wins Immunity. If there is no winner after one hour, those players still in the challenge will compete in a sudden-death race to the top of a Mayan pyramid, again with the pots on their heads. The first to finish, or the player who gets the farthest before touching or dropping their pot, wins Immunity.

So, the Hidden Immunity Idol. I'm not a fan, but that's mostly because fifteen seasons later it's still around, despite having outstayed its welcome by at least half that time. We've seen just about as much variety with its usage as we're going to – indeed, in its first fourteen seasons the idol has been a complete non-event in six, including four with multiple idols in play. This time, however, it has the least confusing and most successful usage rules – play it before the vote and get Immunity like the challenge winner – and as a result it's nowhere near as frustrating as it is in future seasons. It was also a new and fresh twist to the format, which is always welcome.

And speaking of new and fresh twists, the 'eat or compete?' twist debuts in this episode too, at the Immunity Challenge. It's really just another way to show the tribe's unstated dynamics in the same way as the 'three strikes' challenge, and it's just as successful. The one issue with it, generally, is they always put it with lame endurance challenges that take far too long or even lamer mental or skill challenges that don't take anywhere near long enough. This is a particularly lame endurance challenge, with the tiebreaker rule seemingly forced into usage by the twist itself. Take the twist and the tiebreaker out and it suddenly becomes a cool challenge. They could have even still had the tiebreaker and simply made it a two-stage challenge, with a set number of players eliminated before the rest competed in the race, and it would have felt less like a back-up plan than it did here.

## EPISODE NINE

Atlatl	One at a time, each player is given one attempt with a replica of a Mayan weapon called an atlatl to fling an arrow down a field and onto a giant bullseye target on the ground. After the challenge, players will be taken to a lodge and given meals of different qualities in order of their finish, with the player closest to the centre winning the best meal, and so on until the player farthest away. Sharing meals is forbidden, but the 'winner' also receives the right to invite two players of their choice to their table and split the three meals, and a clue for the Hidden Immunity Idol.
Bridge It	Each player must cross a sloped balance beam without falling, untying two planks attached to the beam as they go. The first four to finish advance to the second round, where they must use the planks to cross a knotted rope bridge. The first two to finish advance to the final round, where they must use a rope and two crisscrossing support ropes to cross over a pool to the finish platform. The first to finish wins Immunity.

I do not believe it would be particularly erroneous to point out *Atlal* is one of the season's least impressive challenges. It may even be one of the worst *Survivor* challenges of all time. On the one hand, it's a terribly dull weapons accuracy task. On the other, only giving each player one attempt with a weapon they've almost certainly never seen (let alone handled) before essentially makes it a total crapshoot. The only redeeming feature is the structure of the reward, which allows for everybody to at least win SOMETHING. Meanwhile, the Immunity Challenge is a fairly standard affair that nonetheless seems rather cool simply because of the unintentional sight gag in the final round, with one player basically cartwheeling over the ropes into the water. Had that not happened, I doubt people would even remember the challenge. Not a great episode, and sadly it only gets more underwhelming from here until the finale.

## EPISODE TEN

Mudslide	Players are split into four-person teams, each containing two pairs belted together. One pair at a time must wade across a mud pit and over/under/over three fences to collect a pot full of corn, then carry it back along the same obstacles to pour it into a larger pot at the start. The first to fill their pot to a marked line wins an overnight trip to a local home, with coffee and surprise video messages from home.
Around The Bend	In this reinvention of a challenge from <i>Survivor: Borneo</i> , each player is belted to a rope that winds through a truss, a vertical rope maze, and a hitching rail, and must manoeuvre their own body along the rope from one end to the other. The first four to finish advance to the final round, where they must repeat the process on a single, much larger obstacle. The first to finish wins Immunity.

I'm really not sure how to feel about Mudslide. It's a challenge with a fairly unique method of determining a winner – and 'fill this to the marked line' really should be done more often than other mainstays like 'raise a flag' or 'finish the jigsaw puzzle' – but the challenge itself is... kind of awful, to be honest, and that's even before you consider the product placement coffee in the reward. By comparison, the pretty monotonous Immunity Challenge (an update of the old rope mazes from the first two seasons, and of two of *Survivor: Vanuatu's* challenges) looks pretty good. Even though the idea itself actually isn't all that new or inventive, given it's basically a flat-out race, the way it's handled makes it feel as though it is. And at this point in a show's development, that's what's needed more than anything. (For the record, the challenge is 'get from one end of the rope to the other'. It doesn't require working out. JUDD.)

## EPISODE ELEVEN

Shattered Dreams	In this challenge adapted from <i>Survivor: Marquesas</i> , players must answer a series of trivia questions about Guatemala and the Maya. Each time they select the correct answer from the provided options, they are allowed to use a Maya war club to smash a hanging pot of corn representing any player excluding themselves. When all three of a player's pots are smashed, they are out of the challenge. The last player left wins a trip to a waterfall with a feast and one player of their choice.
Maya Folklore	In this challenge adapted from <i>Survivor: Borneo</i> , players will be told a short story about the Mayan goddess Ixchel. They must then run to each of seven stations in a clearing and assemble six tiles to form a question about the story. Two boxes marked with possible answers are adjacent, and the player must open the box they believe is correct to collect a coloured flag, which they must hang at their starting point. If they are incorrect, they will instead find a coloured stick which they must throw into a cauldron before returning for the flag, costing them time. The first to collect and hang all seven flags wins Immunity.

Two standard challenges, both discussed to death in prior appearances – this is the ninth for the Reward Challenge and the fifth for the Immunity Challenge – without any real changes. There's really nothing more I can add. Which is probably a good thing, because this is the last time we see the Jeff's Storytime challenge.

## EPISODE TWELVE

Loved Ones Auction	In this challenge adapted from <i>Survivor: The Australian Outback</i> , players are given US\$500 to bid on a series of items (among them an overnight loved-one visit and an advantage in the Immunity Challenge) in an auction. Sharing is allowed, but only those who pool money can share an item. The auction will end without warning.
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### Watch Your Step

In this challenge adapted from *Survivor: Borneo*, players start from separate corners of a multi-level hexagonal game board and must take turns flipping over adjacent (non-diagonal) white tiles to show the red side before stepping onto them. The top level of the board rotates, allowing players to reposition themselves if they wish, and the player who purchased the advantage is allowed to switch positions with any other player once during the challenge. When a player is unable to move to a white tile, they are out of the challenge. The last player left wins Immunity.

Again we have two standard challenges from the show's early seasons, although this time there are tweaks to the established formula to make them feel moderately fresh. The auction is a *Survivor* staple, although with the addition of game-changing powers to the item list (which become rote from this point) it becomes much more strategic than it had ever been in the past. That said, I surely can't have been the only person who felt like auctioning off loved ones felt a bit like prostitution, especially when the winner (and their invitees) got the camp to themselves for the night as part of the prize.

The Immunity Challenge is probably my favourite of *Survivor*'s recurring challenges. In the space of this one challenge, you've got a mental challenge unlike anything else the show has ever offered, and a strategic game that quite often unintentionally reveals the pecking order. Add that it shows up so rarely – only four times to date, with one of them being completed by players' loved ones instead – and nobody ever bothers to work out a strategy for the game because they don't expect it to appear. And in this appearance, there's not only the advantage and the rotating level to deal with, but it seems there are also two unshown sets of special spaces allowing players to stay where they are for a turn and to flip over any red tile back to white (watch Lydia's movement for proof of both). It's brilliant.

## EPISODE THIRTEEN

### Second Chance

In this reinvention of a concept from *Survivor: The Australian Outback*, players will perform several tasks based on elements of prior challenges. They must cross a tilting balance beam without falling, untying three pairs of Mayan war clubs as they go. The first three to finish advance, and must throw their clubs to break a tile thirty feet away. The first two to finish advance, and must assemble eighteen pieces to form a small Mayan calendar before getting into a cart and using a machete to chop the anchor rope, sending it down the hill to the finish. The first to finish wins a new car and an overnight stay at an archaeologists' camp with a barbecue, and the option to forfeit the car so that the other four players all receive identical cars.

### Pole Dancing

Starting with their feet shackled and hands cuffed around a pole, and belted to the end of a long rope locked in place, players must reach a keyring above and use one of the ten keys to unlock their cuffs, before hobbling to a second pole and unlocking their rope. They must then unwind the rope from a line of poles until they can reach the final pole, where they will find the key to unlock their feet. They must then continue unwinding the rope until they have enough slack to reach the finish line on the far end of the clearing. The first to finish wins Immunity.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: The greatest problem with the 'second chance' concept is the need for the previous challenges to be designed in such a way to allow them to be repeated by players competing individually, within a single environment. As much as this season's version of the challenge seems especially poor, I can't fault them when there really aren't so many unique challenges they could have reused. Taking into account the location used, the only possible other usage I can see is an additional phase reusing *Around The Bend*, which would have the added benefit of eliminating one player in each stage instead of the more awkward approach used here.

Pole Dancing, Pole Dancing, Pole Dancing. Well, the first time I wrote a guide to *Survivor* challenges part of the description was, 'A confusing, horrible monstrosity that to this day I still don't quite understand.' After being revisited in *Survivor: Nicaragua* (where it became one of the season's better challenges mostly due to how atrocious the rest were), I've since melllowed out on the challenge, but it's still never going to be one of my favourites. It's just too hard to understand in one sitting, and too similar to *Around The Bend* to boot.

## EPIISODE FOURTEEN

Maya Maze	Players must enter a giant macaw-shaped maze to find one of six stations where they can collect colour-coded pieces. Some stations contain one piece, some contain two. Once players have found a station and collected their piece(s), they must return to the maze entrance and run across a line of floating platforms to a ladder, then climb it and drop off their piece before crossing one of two bridges and climbing back down into the maze to continue searching. When they have collected all eight of their three-sided pieces, they must fit them into a solving station and spin them to form either a jaguar, a crocodile, or a monkey. The first to finish any one of the images wins Immunity.
Wobbly Boots	Players must each stand on a plank built on a ball pivot (which allows it to tilt in 360 degrees) for as long as possible, using only two thin dangling ropes for support. After one hour they must let go of one rope, and after another thirty minutes they must let go of the other. When a player touches the platform beneath the plank, they are out of the challenge. The last player left wins Immunity and by default their choice of final Tribal Council opponent.

Two amazing challenges, back to back, although sadly each challenge is shielded from greatness because of a simple flaw in design. The maze might be large but really isn't particularly difficult (it's symmetrical and thus you've really only got to find the paths to three separate stations before repeating the movements on the other side), and the final challenge of the season has one of the most infamous breaks of all time – as long as you don't touch the ground you're not out, so once you inevitably start to fall all over the place you can brace yourself against one of the support poles and just stay there while sweat very slowly help gravity do its work. That said, I do like both challenges, but the first has been done better elsewhere and the second is flawed enough to guarantee we'll never see it again.